

In brief

FDA demands tissue bank registration: The US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has issued a rule requiring all tissue banks to register and list their products with the agency. The rule covers traditional transplantable tissues, such as skin and heart valves, as well as new products, such as fetal cells used to treat Parkinson's disease. The provisions will allow the FDA to track tissue transmissible diseases.

Belgium to decriminalise cannabis: Belgium is set to become the second country in the European Union, after the Netherlands, to decriminalise the use of cannabis. The Belgian cabinet has approved the personal use of the soft drug by anyone over the age of 18 and will now submit the proposal to parliament to amend the existing legislation, which dates from 1921. It will, however, remain a crime to deal in cannabis, produce it in commercial quantities, or supply it to minors.

BMA welcomes bill on organ transplantation: The BMA has welcomed a private member's bill, put forward by former health secretary Kenneth Clarke, MP, which is designed to update the existing law on human organ transplantation. It aims to amend section 1 of the Human Tissue Act 1961, so that it more accurately reflects existing medical practice. For example, it makes clear that doctors do not have to consult every living relative of a donor.

Spanish nurses arrive to work in the NHS: The first group of 60 nurses recruited from Spain arrived in the United Kingdom last week. They will work in hospital trusts in the north west of England. The nurses are all fully qualified.

UK drug industry plans to tackle animal activists: The Association of the British Pharmaceutical Industry has proposed a plan to counter the intimidation and harassment tactics of animal extremists. The association recommends that information about threats and violence should be made public.

Holy water not always a blessing

Doug Payne *Dublin*

It may be holy, but it might not be very healthy. For the second time in four years competitors in the Irish Young Scientist contest have been examining holy water—and their findings suggest that some fonts are filthy.

Three 14 year old girls from County Kildare were the latest to examine fonts at local churches after one of them developed a rash on her forehead after blessing herself with holy water. Tiny green worms about half a centimetre long turned up in one font they tested while large quantities of dirt showed up in others.

Although the project—one of 470 by nearly 2000 students—was originally intended to compare outdoor with indoor fonts, the young researchers found dirt in both. The eggs for the tiny green worms posed the greatest threat to health, but the girls were unable to suggest a solution. At the very least, they con-



cluded, "there should be someone there to clean the water and to take out anything that is big enough to be seen."

In a 1998 entry from County Clare in the annual science fair, three girls grew bacterial cultures from holy water. They

found coliforms, staphylococcus, yeasts, and moulds.

Two years ago some churches in Dublin removed fonts from church vestibules after the discovery that drug addicts were washing or rinsing their syringes in the fonts. □

NICE approves drugs for Alzheimer's disease

Zosia Kmietowicz *London*

Health authorities and trusts in England and Wales have been told to end the rationing of drugs to treat Alzheimer's disease and to make them available to all patients in whom they might slow the progression of the disease.

The National Institute for Clinical Excellence (NICE) last week issued guidance on the drugs donepezil (Aricept), rivastigmine (Exelon), and galantamine (Reminyl), saying that drug treatment should now form one component of care in people with mild to moderate symptoms.

Treatment with these drugs, which can improve memory and other functions, should be started only after specialist assessment, though once the treatment has been started, patients can be looked after under shared protocols with GPs.

An estimated 400 000 people in England and Wales have Alzheimer's disease, and it is thought that up to 35 000 of them could be eligible for drug treatment right away. As the benefit of treatment is thought to last three years the number receiving treatment could rise to 75 000 a year.

It is estimated that the wider use of these drugs for dementia could cost the NHS £67m (\$100m) a year: £42m for the drugs and £25m to pay for the extra staff needed to monitor the effects of the drug. Part of these costs, however, will be offset by the fact that patients can put off the need for care in a nursing home for longer.

"The judgment from NICE potentially leaves the way clear for patients suffering from Alzheimer's disease to benefit

from anti-dementia drugs, regardless of where they live," said Alistair Burns, professor of old age psychiatry at Manchester University.

"It is clear that these drugs are not a cure for Alzheimer's disease," he said. "Some people certainly get an improvement in their symptoms when they are taking the drugs, and the progression of the illness seems to be slowed down in other people. But, unfortunately, for a number of people the drugs make no difference to the course of symptoms of the illness."

The institute also recommended that the drug riluzole (Rilutek) should be made available on the NHS to patients with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, the most common form of motor neurone disease, which affects about 2000 people in England and Wales.

Treatment with the drug—which extends the time that people remain in the milder stages of disease, when they do not require such intensive care—will cost the NHS around £7.5m. □